



# Investigating sexual strategies in a social community website



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## Abstract

In this exploratory study we tried to corroborate existing findings of *Sexual Strategies Theory* (SST, Buss & Schmitt, 1993) by using data collected from an online community.

A random sample of  $N = 460$  German user profiles was drawn from *Myspace*, a social networking website. Sexual interests reported by the users were analyzed separately for men and women: "Dating" served as an indicator of short-term and interest in "Serious Relationship" as an indicator of long-term sexual strategy. Consistent with SST, a higher percentage of male than female users was interested in dating. However, men were also more interested in serious relationships, indicating that online partner search itself might be a short-term sexual strategy.

## Introduction

Online communities where users can create their own web sites and connect with other members have become extremely popular during the last years. At the latest since the tremendous success of the web portal "Myspace" ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)), which had over 100 million members by the end of 2006, online-based social networks have become a mass phenomenon and part of everyday culture.

The fact that millions of users reveal personal data in a standardized form opens up new perspectives for psychological research. Certain data are available more or less immediately and do not have to be gathered by means of classical data collection methods (e.g., questionnaire) any more. In the present exploratory study we examined whether user data collected from an online-community can be used in principle to test simple psychological hypotheses. Special attention was drawn to the demographic representativeness of the data.

We tried to corroborate existing findings of *Sexual Strategies Theory* (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The authors postulate different mate-selection strategies for men and women and demonstrate that men tend to use short-term sexual strategies more often than women. Long-term sexual strategies, however, are used by both sexes to the same extent. Therefore, corresponding tendencies should be observable for online community users when examining their mating preferences.

## Method

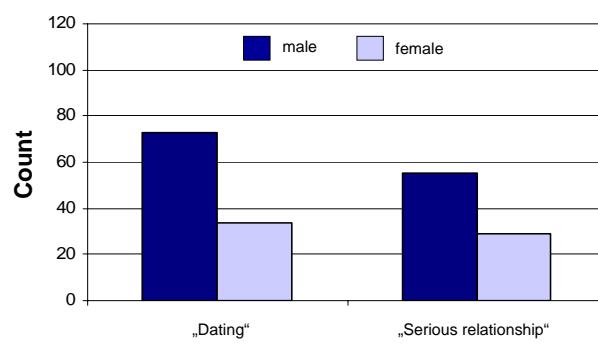
For the present study  $N = 460$  personal homepages of German Myspace-users were captured and analyzed. A random sample of ten male and ten female profiles was drawn for each age between 18 and 40 years by using the Myspace-search-function. This function allows users to find other members and filter on specific criteria like *gender*, *age*, or *body size*. The number of results shown is, however, limited to 3,000 search hits in Myspace. Hence each age group had to be subdivided into groups smaller than 3,000 by using a combination of different search criteria (we used: *gender* and *body size*). By using these variables we created a total of 322 subgroups each containing between one and 3,000 persons. Then from each of these subgroups between zero and ten profiles were randomly drawn. The number of profiles drawn from each subgroup depended on the relative size of the subgroup compared to the total number of people in one age group.

The selected profiles were retrieved within 48 hours and saved to be analyzed later. Among variables like *gender*, *age*, *marital status*, *income* and *education* the users stated reasons for joining Myspace (i.e., *dating*, *serious relationship*, *friendship* or *networks*; multiple entries in these four variables were possible). For our analysis, *dating* served as an indicator for short-term sexual strategy and *serious relationship* as one for long-term sexual strategy. Persons providing multiple entries were counted in both groups. Persons with none of these entries were not counted.

## Results

A total of 73 male users (31.7 %) vs. 34 female users (14.8 %) stated to have registered to *Myspace* for dating ( $\chi^2[460] = 18.52, p < .001$ ). This finding is consistent with Sexual Strategies Theory.

However male users also indicated to be more interested in finding a steady partner. A total of 55 men (23.9%) vs. 29 women (12.6%) declared to be looking for a serious relationship ( $\chi^2[460] = 9.86, p < .05$ ). According to Buss and Schmitt one should have expected a nearly equal distribution.



### Stated Interest

About half (50.2 %) of the analyzed *Myspace*-members consider themselves as singles (55% male vs. 45% female). Among this group 27.9% of the female and 48.8 % of the male users stated to be interested in dating ( $\chi^2[231] = 10.5, p < .01$ ). A serious relationship was in the interest of 25.0% of the female and 37.8% of the male singles ( $\chi^2[231] = 4.3, p < .05$ ) Thus the gender difference for interest in "serious relationship" is smaller if only single *Myspace* users are examined.

## Discussion

Our results indicated that dating as provided by the *Myspace* user might serve as a simple proxy of short-term sexual strategy: In accordance with SST men (in the overall and in the singles sample) reported a greater interest in dating than women.

Interest in serious relationships as an indicator of long-term relationships was higher for men than for women when investigating the overall sample. Even though this difference between rates for both sexes is slightly smaller than for dating, this finding is not in line with SST predicting equal rates for long-term mating interest for both sexes. Male participants of online communities might generally have a greater mating motivation than female users.

Overall results indicate, that information provided by users of online communities can be used to test hypotheses generated from psychological theories thereby avoiding typical biasing effects when people are aware that they are participating in a study (e.g., effects due to the investigator). However, since users are aware that their information is read by other people, their answers might still be influenced by social desirability and impression management.

## References

Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). Sexual Strategies Theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review*, 100, 204-232.

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